

BRUTO THE BOLT BREAKER

Drawings by G. E. Wolfe

By PAUL WEST

MAXEY CONHEIM, "Conceiver and Director of the Most Unique and Classy Headline Features—Imported & Domestic," stood at his office window looking down into Times Square, and cursing the war, a practice in which he had indulged himself with increasing frequency as the Great European Free-for-All had gained momentum with the passing weeks.

For a year previous to that eventful day when the goosestep first resounded from Belgian paving blocks with an echo calling half the world to arms, Maxey had been directing his curses toward the movies and the dancing craze—those Allies before which the show business had been driven out of its trenches, fought almost to the surrendering point. Against the on-sweep of the tango and the film, however, he had battled, with both Frankel, head center of the Trust, and Billy Schell, leader of the Independents, backing him up, and sustained by the hope of an early change of public taste back to the sort of "acts" in which he specialized.

At last, encouraged by a prediction from some sanguine source that the approaching season would bring the much desired shift of sentiment, and appreciating the demand for foreign acts, Maxey had made a hurried trip to Europe in the early part of the summer, signing up half a dozen big features for which he anticipated easy and steady booking on both circuits; so that it had begun to look, up to the first of August, as if the future might twinkle with a few more diamonds for his wife Ray (her visible glamour having been somewhat depleted by the large advance payments he had had to make to secure some of the acts), and jingle with a few more dollars in his own pockets.

Then, because a misguided Serb had seen fit to assassinate a Hapsburg and his consort, every European was suddenly seized with a desire to slaughter every other European, and in the ensuing clash of arms Maxey's hopes were shot away like the tail feathers of the Dove of Peace. One after another of his big foreign acts fell on him, and, in helpless hatred for the cause of his misfortunes, he took to cursing the war.

With delightful neutrality cursed he it! When, instead of the Mecklenburger Sisters, Empresses of the Slack Wire, the last German steamer to reach New York brought him a photograph of the twain in Red Cross nurse's uniform, Maxey cursed the cause of the Germans. A week later he transferred his anathemas to the Little White Father, when Ivan Ivanoffsky, the Cossack Convoluted, went with his regiment against Anatolia; and when the Angilofettes, Italian acrobats, two of whom were English and two German, split up to fight against each other on the Aisne, Maxey raised his clenched fist and hoped a fervent hope that "the whole gang kills everybody else!"

FINALLY the only solace left was Boncourt, the

Great Boncourt, for whose piano specialty Maxey had fought with half a dozen other agents. He had persuaded Boncourt to Schell, who had gone so enthusiastically over it, even after discounting Maxey's description forty per cent., that the little agent had special himself for a setting for the act, including special furniture, special velvet curtains, special floor cloths, and various other attractions to "give class" to the general arrangement.

The Great Boncourt was due to arrive on the Philadelphia early in November, and Schell had already made tentative plans for his opening at the Palatine; when Maxey received a letter. It said:

Paris, Novembre 1.

MIER MOSS.—One million regrets, but I shall not sail as I intended. I have been to the front called with my beloved reserves, and my patriotic heart responds. But have no fear: for powerful influences work for me, and within a few days I shall be relieved, when I shall immediately sail for your dear city. I shall inform you of the date of my sailing, which will be within the week.

Till then for the honor and glory of France.

I am, cher Moss,

Raoul (the Great) BONCOURT.

At this Maxey breathed a curse for the tricolor and waited. The days went by, and another boat was due; but there came neither the Great Boncourt nor tidings from him. His velvet curtains were ready, with a huge B embroidered in gold in the center of each—also the bill for them. Maxey began to worry.

"Maybe," he had been thinking this afternoon, as he stood looking down into the square, his gaze unconsciously lingering on the crowd thronging about a war bulletin, "maybe he's havin' a little trouble (fuckin' out an' can't send me word. It couldn't be they wouldn't leave him go—a little guy like him! But if he should get the nightin' bag an'— God! he gasped, at the horrid thought suggested itself. At this moment Benny, his faithful assistant, entered.

"'Tee it is—and if
He do say hit meself—"



"Got five bucks?" demanded Benny, to the point. "No!" snapped Maxey. Then, contradictorily, "What for?"

"Four seventy-five for the cable an' a quarter for the lad."

He held out an envelop, which Maxey grabbed expectantly, at the same time tossing Benny a bill. He ripped the message open and read:

Paris, via London, Nov. 7.

MAXHEIM, New York.—My hero brother shot in both ankles. Weep with us.

FREDERIC BONCOURT.

For an instant Maxey was speechless. His face contorted itself in an agony of rage and disappointment, and the cablegram dropped to the floor from his nerveless hands. Then, clenching his fists, he shook them wildly at the throng in front of the bulletins below, from whose combined throats arose at this moment a mighty roar at the reception of some bit of news from the scene of conflict.

"Oh!" he screamed. "Oh! The French! I hope they get slaughtered! I hope the Kaiser has 'em eatin' out of his hand! I hope—"

"What's the matter now?" demanded Benny, bursting into the room.

"That!" moaned Maxey, pointing to the crumpled cablegram on the floor, which Benny picked up and read. "Yod! Yod!" cried Benny. "Shot in the bot' ankles! That'll lay him up a couple o' weeks sure!"

"Weeks!" cried Maxey. "Weeks! It'll lay him off the rest of his life! He's through! Seven hundred a week! Those hundred an' fifty an' ankle! 'Weep with us!' If I had 'em here, I'd give 'em somethin' to weep over! Yeah, an' if ever I get hold o' the Dutchman that done it—the Dutchman that put the lalosh on the fanciest piano act that was ever pulled—"

"Aw, cheer up!" Benny interrupted. "It's tough luck for awhile, sure; but he ain't said he won't be over at all. Gettin' plugged in the shins ain't goin' ter lay a pianer player up forever."

"It ain't?" howled Maxey. "You sim! Don't you know why Boncourt's act is such a wonder? He plays with his feet!"

Benny stared speechlessly at his chief. Then came a knock at the outer door, and he went to answer it. When he returned a moment later Maxey was seated in his chair, hunched down like a stricken man, and at

Benny's entrance he seemed about to rouse himself into another outburst against Fate. Benny held up his hand. "Hold on!" he whispered. "The's a guy out there."

"Who's it?"

"Bruto the Bolt Breaker."

"Who the Winch?" demanded Maxey.

"Bruto the Bolt Breaker, I got it," said Benny; "but he's so bloomin' English he might o' been sayin' 'God save the King.' He says—"

"Rush him out! I can't see nobody!"

"—he's a great act, an'—"

"Rush him in!" whispered Maxey excitedly. "What'scher standin' there fer like a bunch light? Bruto?" he repeated to himself, as Benny left the room. "Begins with a B—then velvet curtains—"

HONEST, Ray," Maxey told his wife that evening, leaning across the table in the restaurant where they were dining, and shouting to enable her to hear him over the din of the dance band's music, "the minute that guy come in I seen the cloud-breakin'. Somethin' about him—I dunno—quaser-lookin' Johnny Bull, reg'lar Cockney, but a gen'min' clean through, even if he is eatin' snowballs just now. As fer his act, if he can make good on half what he says—well, the's a guy named Houdini in the same line draggin' down three thou' a week easy. O' course Bruto wouldn't get nothin' like that to open; but you never can tell."

"But what does he do?"

"Just what I been tellin' you,—busts out o' things,—handcuffs, chains, ropes, anything. Why, he leaves 'em shut him up inside a steel safe, an' chain that all up, an' in two minutes he's out again!"

"Maxey, he couldn't!"

"I know; but he does."

"But ain't there some trick about it?"

"Shoooh!" he cautioned. "I don't want to think so. If I did, I couldn't go to Schell tomorrow and do myself justice. He's goin' ter be sore on me about this here traitor Boncourt, an' I've gotter make him think Bruto's twice the act. An' you know me,—if I don't believe in an act, I can't talk it! But come on home now. I want to rest up."

"Oh, Maxey?" pleaded Mrs. Conheim as he rose. "Ain't you goin' ter stay an' have just one dance?"

"Nothin'!" said her spouse. "It's had enough to